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ABSTRACT

This study is an ex post facto analysis of the life histories of 24 Olympic female champions which attempts to determine events and variables in the psychological and social driving forces behind outstanding achievement in sports. The data was gathered by (a) personal interviews, (b) the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS), and (c) a data questionnaire. Analysis of the clinical data revealed some developmental dynamics that may characterize all subjects: a deep desire to excel, early goal-setting and the ability to follow through with these goals, a strong self-concept, well-developed heterosexuality, and parents who were supportive and had high expectations of their daughters. Analysis of the EPPS data revealed two pronunced psychological variables: a high need for achievement and a high need for autonomy. The personality profile of the group showed a balanced curve, indicating emotional stability and normal personal adjustment. (Author/PB)

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A Psycho-Social Study of Outstanding Female Athletes

Eva K. Balazs

This research was made in 1974 in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Ed.D. degree at Boston University, School of Education, under the chairmanship of Professor Arthur G. Miller.

This was an ex post-facto analysis of the life histories of twenty-four Olympic female champions to determine events and variables in the psychological and social driving forces behind outstanding achievement in sports. The data was gathered by 1. personal interviews, 2. the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) and 3. a Data Questionnaire. The analysis of the clinical data revealed some developmental dynamics that seemed to characterize all subjects: a deep desire to excel, early goal-setting and the ability to follow through these goals, a strong self-concept, well developed heterosexuality and parents who were supportive and had high expectations from their daughters. The analysis of the EPPS data revealed two pronounced psychological variables: a high need for achievement and high need for autonomy. The personality profile of the group showed a balanced curve, indicating emotional stability and normal personal adjustment.

Psychological research on high achievement of women in sports is extremely limited. The major purpose of this study was to identify variables in the psychological make-up and social development of a group of outstanding female athletes. Some of the questions posed concerned patterns of similarity in the develcpment of the subjects' lives and differences that distinguished them from the average female population.

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Review of Literature

The review of literature in this article is limited to the listing of only a few important studies in which the psychology of women, female achievement and competition are discussed.

The Feminine Problem - Conflict between Femininity and Competition.

To be successful in sports - or in any other endeavor - the person has to display competence, self-reliance and willingness to take risks. These attributes are highly admired in American Society, but seem to apply to men only. Where women are concerned the same qualities are not appreciated. Dorothy Harris (1971) describes the dilemma and deplores the fact that if a girl wants to participate in a competitive sport, she too has to display the same traits, but if she does, she risks her feminine image. Matina Horner (1968, 1971) puts the same idea into a wider perspective when she says that in our achievement-oriented society achievement, self-realization and the development of all the potentials of the individual are rewarded and valued. Cultural attitudes toward the male role-expectation, however, is different from that of the female. Society's inability to reconcile femininity with ambition and personal accomplishment is well documented in Horner's research. Women worry not only about failure but also about success. The situation described is perhaps nowhere more evident than in sports. The more successful a woman becomes as an athlete, the more afraid she seems to be that she will lose the feminine image. The stereotype of female athlete: aggressive, frustrated,

unfeminine, well described by Therese Malumphy (1971), poses a threat or at least discouragement to many girls who would like to participate in sports. The notion persists even today, that girls and sports do not go well together. Society seems to be saying that females are somehow different, even "abnormal" if they pursue the striving for excellence in athletics. Research of those who do achieve eminence in sports is growing but it is still scarce. Among the few investigators are Kane and Callaghan (1965) who focused on the personablity characteristics of world-class female tennis-players. The investigators found that emotional stability, ego-strength and low frustration characterized these top players. The authors reported no loss of the "feminine traits, valued within the culture and society". In fact there was strong evidence that this sample of women had "markedly feminine personalities in the presence of outstanding success as competitors". Ogilvie and Tutko (1967) studied the personality traits of female swimming champions. These researchers also found that "traits which our culture define as feminine, like low aggression, low dominance and high nurturance were characteristic of the group". Ogilvie further investigated (1967, 1968, 1970, 1973) the personality structure of top women athletes in such varied sports as fencing, parachuting and race-car driving, but the personality development in relation to athletic achievement is still a largely unexplored area.

Procedure and Organization

Twenty-four female subjects volunteered, who represented the United States in the 1972 Olympic Games as members of the

swimming, gymnastics, track-and-field and ski teams. The subjects were contacted by letter to ask for their cooperation in the research and to establish a date and place for a meeting. In-depth interviews were then conducted with each subject at various parts of the United States. A wide variety of topics were covered concerning the athletes' lives from early childhood to the present time. (See Appendix) Tape recorder was used. Each athlete was also asked to complete a Personal Data Questionnaire (PDQ), which was a biographical inventory developed by the researcher, and a standardized psychological test, the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS). While the clinical data represented the heart of the study, the PDQ was helpful in separating the factual material from the clinical analysis. The EPPS was selected as appropriate for this study because it provides an instrument for individual and group assessment of such normal personality traits as achievement, autonomy and aggression and the scores on these personality scales can be compared with the general female population similar in age and educational background.

The organization was as follows. First the factual data, obtained from the PDQ was presented. The findings were analysed, and Frequency Distribution, Mean, Median and Standard Deviation were recorded in Tables and Figures. Then the clinical material of the interviews was analysed. The subjects' life experiences were studied according to the life periods of Childhood, Adolescence and Young Adulthood. It was possible to identify and report a number of development dynamics that existed and seemed

to pervade through the life stages of all subjects. Finally, the scores on the EPPS were analyzed and arranged to provide a personality profile for each individual. At the end twenty-four profiles were averaged into a group profile which was then compared with the national norm for a female population corresponding in age and education.

Results and Discussion

1. The data on the PDQ revealed that more than half of the subjects were first born children or first born daughters. This seems to be a rather typical finding in research on outstanding women. (Hennig, 1971; Douvan, 1965). The athletes were ranging in age from 15 1/2 to 29. The majority came from four-sibling or larger families and 66% of the sisters and brothers were also engaged in various forms of competitive athletics. The data also revealed that the swimmers started earliest as competitors and made it to the top at the youngest age. One swimmer was only five years old at her first competition and fifteen and a half when she won a Gold Medal at the Olympics. The data analysis indicated that two athletes made the Olympic Team after only two years of competing, while two others accomplished this in twelve years time. It was also interesting to note that one of the skiers was twenty-four years of age when she first entered competition.

2. The analysis of the clinical data (interviews) suggested that there were some basic, identical patterns in the developmental dynamics. All subjects had a strong and early drive to achieve, to "be the best in something", "to become somebody".

They internalized this need early in childhood and set a goal for themselves to excel in a sport. The wish to perform on the highest level was intense and remained constant throughout the years, even during adolescence, when the majority of girls would abandon such wishes. The subjects found ways to cope with peer society's pressures to conform to the norms and lived up to their own aspirations rather than to peer's expectations. "Kids didn't have the feeling for what I was doing. They just couldn't understand me and frankly I didn't give a damn..."

It was clearly apparent from the case histories that the childhood experiences and family set-up played a crucial role in the subject's development. Fathers were described by almost all as "available". "He was around a lot" - and they seemed to indicate the importance of this fact. Findings from other studies (Hennig 1971, Konopka 1965) also affirm the significance of the father in the lives of achieving females as an identification figure in carrying values and setting ideals. It was also apparent that the majority of subjects regarded their parents as the main motivating force in their development. "My parents belief in me was terribly important to me. Their encourangement and constant feedback motivated me more than anything else. I don't know if anybody needed it that much.. it sure worked for me!"

The support of both father and mother was positive and consistent. "I could always count on my family, they were all behind me", "My parents helped me in everything, they never put me down". It was also clear that while supportive and understanding, the parents expected a great deal. "Only doing my very

best would do in my family", "I couldn't get away with nothing less than top performance, in schoolwork or in anything else". The theory of expectancy seems to apply here, namely that the expectancy of achievement by the parents has an effect of evoking achievement-behavior in the offsprings. As Gardner (1968) puts it: without the expectation of excellence there is no achievement of excellence. Another theory is also applicable here, the concept that unless the family believes in certain values and attaches importance to the activity - be it intellectual, artistic or physical- the child is not likely to excel in that specific endeavor (Roe 1953, McLelland 1958). This was certainly true with the subjects. In these families everyone believed that sports are worthwhile endeavors and being outstanding in a sport is all right for girls. Sports do not make a girl unfeminine, seemed to be the message.

The same ideas were constantly reinforced by the coach, who -psychologically speaking- became an extended father figure. Indeed, in some cases the coach was the father himself. The coach had a tremendous potential to mold the young girl's development. He was accepted as an authority figure and was described by many with an emotional tone of voice. "He is the best, I love him..." "He was like a father, teacher and a friend all put together" "He is a king of heart, I would do anything for him".

There was ample documentation in the reports that the parents' and coaches' positive influences provided strongly internationalised feelings of self-worth and self-esteem which then

had a positive effect on goal-attainment. The theory appears to be correct here that there is a high positive correlation between self-esteem and achievement. (Gardner, 1968)

Heterosexual relations were described as satisfying and important to the subjects. As youngsters, the girls perceived themselves as tomboys, who could do "anything as well or better than the guys" and who felt very comfortable in boys company. During adolescence, however, there was a break in the relations. Many a boy, unable to handle a "girl" who is more famous than they, reverted to teasing. "Wow, look at those muscles", "Hey, Baby, wanna wrestle?"- these and similar remarks were painfully remembered. As the years went by, the picture began to change. The young male, now more secure, began to appreciate the accomplishments of these competent, confident girls. At the time of the interviews almost all of the subjects had feelings of enjoyment in dating and being regarded as attractive and desirable by the opposite sex. "Guys are fun", "I love to be in male company." "I love being a woman" Marriage was for almost all definitely part of the future. Twenty-five percent of the athletes were already married (at the average of 21 and 1/2 years).

The psychological dynamics, revealed in the case-histories can be summarized as follows:

strong drive to excel

early goal-setting and following through the original goals

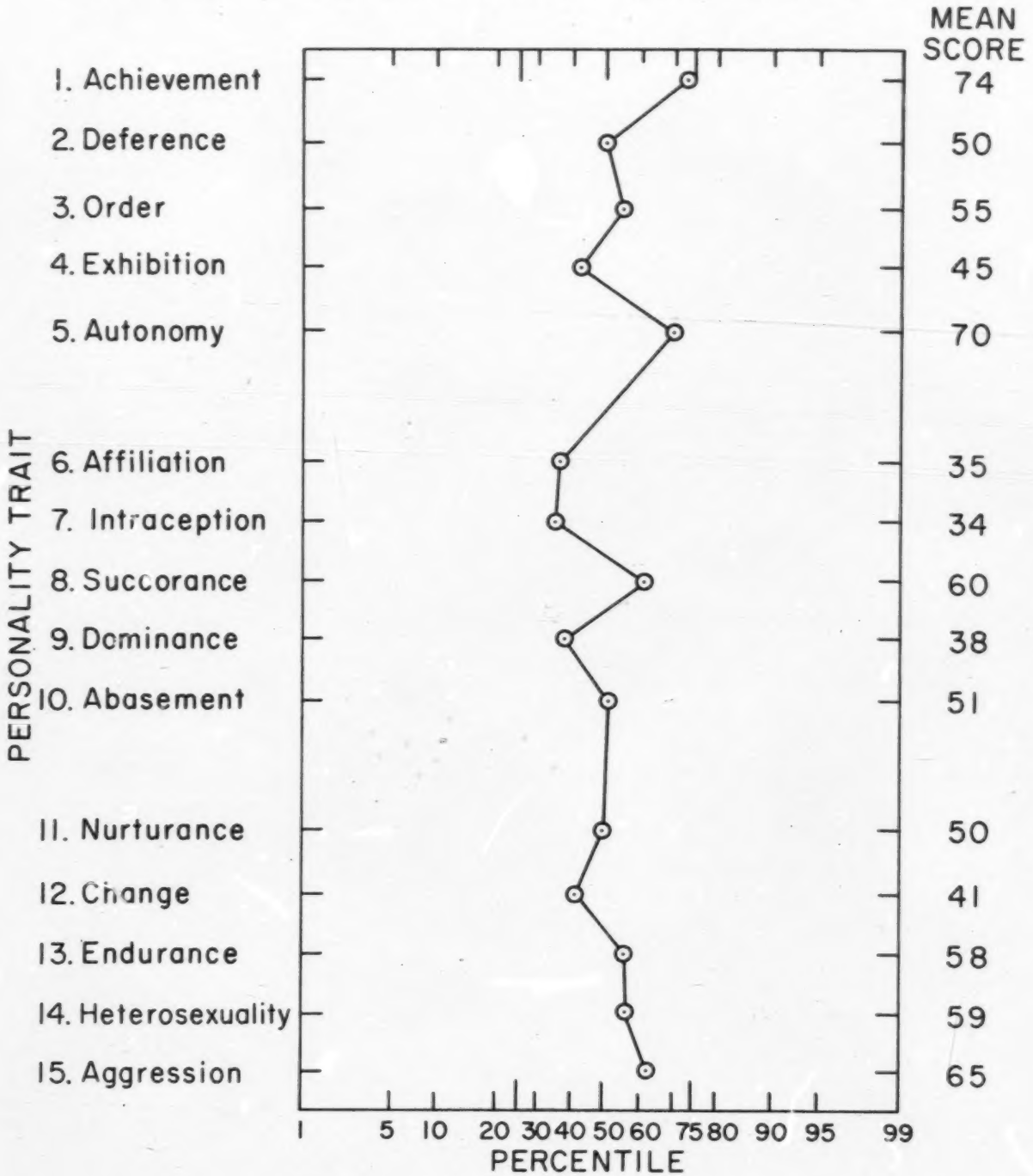
positive self-image

well-developed heterosexuality

family atmosphere where support was coupled with high expectations

main motivating force: parents and the coach.

EPPS PROFILE OF 24 OLYMPIC FEMALE COMPETITORS



3. The analysis of the 15 personality traits on the EPPS revealed a distinct characteristic: the psychological group-profile was almost completely lacking in any deviant or abnormal attributes. As illustrated, the group profile was a well-balanced curve, indicating no significant deviation from the normal population, with the exception of two very high scores on achievement and autonomy.

Insert illustration here

The outstanding female athlete of this study may be described as a person with two important personality needs, a high need for achievement and a high need for autonomy. The needs associated with these variables suggest a person with a strong desire to do well, to get ahead, to be a success. These words are almost identical to the ones that best describe the sample group. She is non-conforming, she does things that are different and does them without regard to what others may think. This variable, too, seems to correlate well with the clinical data. The somewhat above-average group score on aggression and succorance suggest a person with a rather positive self-concept, she tends to be self-confident, but she has a need for encounragement from those persons who are important to her (parents, coach). The group scores on the variable of heterosexuality, also somewhat above average, bespeaks of a need for social interaction,

and experiences with the opposite sex. The remainder of the group scores were almost identical to the average for the normative group and will not be commented upon in this article.

The eveness of most of the EPPS group scores suggested an essentially normal personality development. The curve implied emotional stability and normal personal adjustments - which might be necessary, perhaps even imperative for females to achieve eminence in athletics, or possibly in other endeavors as well.

In summary, it seems reasonable to conclude that the young women of this study projected the picture of a very well put together human being. They had a value-orientation which pushed them from childhood on toward the highest level of performance in sports. Beyond motivation and talent they had a particular family dynamics setup which seemed to be crucial: the parents' support and encouragement was coupled with their high expectations. The subjects gave manifestation of integrity and autonomy and they appeared to hold satisfying social contacts and heterosexual relations. All and all, they had a positive attitude toward life and seemed to enjoy what they were doing.

The insights gained by this study, however, should be viewed with some caution, since only twenty-four athletes participated, who were not randomly picked, but who volunteered and the sports were four specific, individual sports. The findings can hardly be descriptive for all female athletes in all sports. The merits of the study lies in the fact that it presents an analysis of a particular group of outstanding sports-women, which might contribute to the understanding of others who are striving for excellence.

Appendix

Topics raised in the open-ended interviews

Relationship to father, to mother.

View of yourself as a child.

Relationship to brothers and sisters.

Most pleasant childhood memory.

Performance in school. Relationship to teachers. Socialization with peers. Like or dislike of physical education.

Favorite childhood activities (intellectural, sport, manual, etc.)

Favorite companions in school and outside of school.

Nature of choice of the particular sport. Why? At what age?

Setting of goal directions. When" Why? Motivation towards Olympics as a final goal.

Relationship to coach. Feelings toward the male or female domnant figure.

Early dating pattern. Adolescent relationship to boys.

Peer group influence. Pressure or recognition of adolescent society.

Current view of men. Marriage plans.

Career plans. View of future.

Hobbies. Special interest other than sports.

Factors that aid toward success (psychological, social, physical).

Hindering factors in.athletics.

Reward and pleasures of a successful sportswoman.

Problems she has to face.

Persons and/or factors that contributed most to your personal development.

The most valued sports event or award achieved. Why?

Most important traits for a woman to become successful in athletics.

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